DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 185 627 CS 502 899

AUTHOR Breen, Myles P.; Powell, Jon T.
TITLE Why College Students Watch Soap Operas.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Broadcast Education Association (Las Vegas, NV, April 12, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; Behavior Patterns; *College Students; Higher Education; *Popular Culture; *Programing (Broadcast); Sex Differences; Television Research; *Television Viewing
IDENTIFIERS *Soap Operas

ABSTRACT

A survey of 549 college students investigated the size and motivation of the campus audience for soap operas. About half the student population (40% of the women and 10% of the men) claimed to watch the daytime serials. Most of the women viewing the soap operas watched two or three serials per week, with 83.3% following at least two regularly, and 46.1% following at least three regularly. The serial-viewing males watched less; 41.4% watched only one serial, with percentages declining sharply and directly as the number of serials watched increased. "Intriguing plots" and "topics of conversation" were the reasons most often chosen for watching daytime serials. Despite the consensus of the critics, both male and female respondents thought that the female characters were more likely to be the troublemakers in the soaps, an apparent change from past conceptions of the long-suffering female being put upon by men. (Author/RL)

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WHY COLLEGE STUDENTS WATCH SOAP OPERAS

Myles P. Breen

and

Jon T. Powell

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Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

Broadcast Education Association Annual Meeting
April 12, 1980

CS502899

Soap Operas: College Students' Perceptions and Attitudes

Eight years ago, Nathan Katzman pointed out that on the average every adult in the United States saw two hours of soap operas every week.[1] Because of the audience size, and the fact that the daytime serials repeat a limited number of themes every afternoon on as many as 17 programs, Katzman claimed that the daytime serial is potentially a major force in the transmission of values and life styles in the United States. In spite of the fact that it has been part of the American broadcast scene since the 1930's with audiences in excess of twenty million viewers, the soap opera, as Richard Barton has pointed out, has elicited little research compared with children's TV or violence on television.[2]

In her definitive work, The Soap Opera Book, Manuela Soares describes the traditional target audience of the daytime serial: the females between 18 and 40 years of age who comprise 62 per cent of the audience and who purchase 75 per cent of the products advertised.[3] Soares, however, pointed out that in the past few years the audience has been changing. One soap opera, All My Children, has attracted a 30 per cent male audience. In the sixties, while some college students may have watched soap operas, it was not the fashionable thing to do. Today, soap opera watching is an apparent phenomenon of campus life. According to Time magazine, on the Princeton campus, "something like a quarter of the student body drops everything to watch The Young and the Restless each afternoon."[4]

Observing large numbers of students congregating in lounge areas to watch soap operas at their own institution, the writers initiated this study in an attempt to investigate the size, characteristics and motivation of the audience. This study reports on the findings of that investigation.

Building the Questionnaire

Items were generated from classroom discussion where groups of three's and five's were asked the questions such as "What is your most important reason for watching soap operas?" and "What would you like to see more of in soap operas?" When the results of the small group discussions were cascaded into a larger group, the five most frequently recurring reasons were chosen for incorporation into the test instrument as a check list.

The Test Instrument

The questionnaire, entitled "Television Soap Operas and College Students," consisted of 23 questions divided into three sections with the last section of three questions directed only to those who do not watch soap operas. The first section covered demographic information on sex, class level, major, most frequent viewing place, and whether or not the respondent actually watched soap operas.

The second section, to be answered by those who viewed soap operas, identified the extent of the respondent's viewing and the reasons for this. The selection of one of five possible answers allowed for a wide variation of response. Where appropriate, the order of the responses was randomly assigned. Questions asked were as follows:

1. How often do you watch?
   (a) Less than once a week, (b) Once a week, (c) Two to three times a week, (d) Four times a week, (e) More than four times a week.

2. How many different soap operas do you follow?
   (a) Only one, (b) Two, (c) Three, (d) Four, (e) More than four.

3. What is your most important reason for watching?
   (a) Can talk about it with others, (b) Identify with characters, (c) Like to hate the villains, (d) Plot is intriguing, (e) See life is worse for others.

4. What is your least important reason for watching?
(a) Can talk about it with others, (b) Identify with characters, (c) Like to hate the villains, (d) Plot is intriguing, (e) See life is worse for others.

5. If you were to select what is most attractive about the soap opera plot you follow, what would it be? I like the plot mainly because it is:
(a) Complicated, (b) Slow, (c) Obvious what is going to happen, (d) Overdone, (e) Other_____

6. If you were to select what is least attractive about the soap opera you follow, what would it be? I dislike the plot mainly because it is:
(a) Complicated, (b) Slow, (c) Obvious what is going to happen, (d) Overdone, (e) Other_____

7. If you were to select the most attractive aspect of the soap opera character you follow, would it be because:
(a) Of the acting style, (b) You can see yourself in the character, (c) You love to hate the villains, (d) The characters are so dumb, (e) Other_____

8. How does the soap opera best serve you?
(a) Emotional release--chance to fear, hate, admire, etc., (b) Opportunity to follow interesting plots, (c) As a topic of conversation, (d) Amusement from watching how people can be so gullible, naive, foolish, etc., (e) Other_____

9. How does the soap opera least serve you?
(a) Emotional release--chance to fear, hate, admire, etc., (b) Opportunity to follow interesting plots, (c) As a topic of conversation, (d) Amusement from watching how people can be so gullible, naive, foolish, etc.

10. How do you generally feel about viewing soap operas? They are:
(a) Very useful, (b) Useful, (c) Neither useful nor useless, (d) Sometimes useless, (e) Always useless.

11. What would you like to see more of in soap operas?
(a) More complex plots, (b) More "good" characters, (c) More "evil" characters, (d) More realistic plots and charac ers, (e) Other_____
_____

12. In the soap operas you watch, who are more likely to be the troublemakers?
(a) Men, (b) Women, (c) Both equally.

The third section for those who stated they did not view soap operas, asked these questions:

1. What is the major reason why you do not watch soap operas?
(a) Plots are too contrived, (b) Characters are unbelievable, (c) No pleasure in watching other people's problems, (d) The pace is too slow, (e) Other_____

2. What do you think is the major reason why others watch soap operas?
(a) Escapism, (b) Safe sensationalism, no involvement required, just watching, (c) They like to see others suffer, (d) They enjoy hating the villains, (e) Other_____

3. How do you feel about the contribution of soap operas to the viewer's welfare?
(a) Are very useful, (b) Are useful, (c) Make no contribution, (d) Are harmful, (e) Are very harmful.

The Pilot Study

In the Fall of 1975, a field survey was conducted with 458 students being personally interviewed by some 30 interviewers who had been trained for that purpose. Because this first study concentrated on covering areas where students congregated such as the university center and the dormitories, and because male students declined to be interviewed in greater numbers than did the females, an overwhelming majority of the respondents were female (82%). The unrepresentative nature of the sample led to the second survey which contained the appropriate proportions of the sexes. The findings of this first survey were subsequently found to be valuable for comparison with the main study.

The Main Study

The main study was conducted in the Fall of 1977. Of the 549 respondents, 228 completed the self-administered questionnaire in a large lecture class which attracted students from every area of study and 321 students were interviewed in the field in the same manner as before, but with more encouragement for the interviewer to deflect refusals. The interviews and the self-

administered questionnaire each took approximately ten minutes. Ten per cent of the respondents were reinterviewed as a reliability check. As 57.2 per cent of the respondents were female, the sample was acceptable considering that the campus proportion is 53.0 per cent female. The sample also proved to be representative of the on-campus student body with regard to class rank, major, and age. The mean and median age was approximately twenty years of age. There were 3 seventeen-year-olds and 12 people were over twenty-five.

Findings

Of the 549 people queried, 273 (49.7%) said that they watched soap operas. Females who watched soap operas comprised 39.2 per cent of the total sample, and 78.8 per cent of the watchers were female. Putting it another way, fully 10.6 per cent of the men on campus claimed that they watched soap operas, and males comprised 21.2 per cent of the campus soap-watching population.

Of those who watched the soaps, 44.0 per cent claimed to watch 2 to 3 times a week, 20.1 per cent watched less than once a week, 11.4 per cent once a week, 12.5 per cent 4 times a week, and 12.1 per cent more than four times a week. Taking this group with the non-viewers as representative of the total campus population, one could say that 6.0 per cent watched more than four times a week, 6.2 per cent four times a week, 21.9 per cent 2 to 3 times a week, 5.6 per cent once a week and 10.0 per cent less than once a week. That leaves 50.3 per cent who said they did not watch soap operas at all. Perhaps the most revealing statistic is that 68.6 per cent of the viewers claimed that they watched at least 2 to 3 times a week, and that 12.1 per cent claimed to watch more than 4 times a week, thus underlining the habitual nature of the activity.

The results from question two, "How many different soap operas do you

follow?" might lead to the suspicion that the respondents' perceptions of how much they watched would lead them to under-reporting the number of times they watched per week. Of course, one does not have to watch each episode to follow a serial, but 9.9 per cent followed more than four soaps, 13.9 per cent followed four, 17.9 per cent followed three and 36.3 per cent followed two; 78.0 per cent thus claimed to follow at least two serials.

Clearly, the females were the devoted followers; 41.4 per cent of the males who watched soaps claimed to watch one only, and the percentage of males watching declined sharply and directly as the frequency of serials watched increased. However, 5.2 per cent of the males who claimed to watch followed more than four serials. The percentages of females watching from one to more than four soap operas were respectively: one, 16.7; two, 37.2; three, 19.1; four, 15.8; and more than four, 11.2. Thus, 83.3 per cent followed at least two, and 46.1 per cent followed at least three soaps per week.

The responses to the third question, "What is your most important reason for watching soap operas?" indicated that there was an inherent interest in this genre of dramatic presentation. Most important for the largest number (38.5%) was that the plots were intriguing. This corresponded with the findings from the previous survey where 40.9 per cent registered that response. In fact, the pattern for answering this question duplicated the survey done two years earlier with a different sample.

About a third (31.5%, compared with 35.5% from the previous survey) felt that their most important reason for viewing was that they could discuss it with others. This finding compares positively with Barton's contention that for the elderly, soap opera viewing and real world communication were

interrelated activities.[5] While an observer in the large university center where the students congregate to watch soap operas would see an audience paying attention to the screen and indulging in minimal interaction, apparently the students talk about the shows later.

The three other responses garnered fewer first choices. These tended to be more offbeat and unexpected, and may have been an artifact of the small group format from which the questionnaire was initially generated, as there may have been some desire to be interesting or entertaining for the group members' benefit.

However, as the consistent pattern from the previous survey provides evidence for the reliability of the question, the generation of the items from another sample of the student body should make the items more valid. The questions, with their forced choice format, demand a kind of instantaneous introspection, and apparently the students responded conscientiously. Fully 13.6 per cent (9.1% previously) claimed that seeing other lives were worse than their own was the most important reason for watching the serials. Given the suffering reportedly portrayed by the soaps, this might not be a surprising finding. Identification with the characters was most important for 11.7 percent (8.3% previously), and for 4.8 per cent (5.6% previously) it was liking to hate the villains.

The least important reason for watching elicited less of a spread than the previous question. While not an exact mirror image of those of the previous question, the findings were such that it appears that the respondents were conscientious and some valid implications can be presented. The way this question was answered was also generally consistent with the way it was answered two years previously.

Seeing life as worse for others was chosen as least important by 33.3 per cent (38.9% previously), liking to hate the villains by 22.3 per cent (22.8% previously), identifying with characters by 20.9 per cent (26.5% previously), the plot as intriguing by 16.8 per cent (11% previously), and talking with others by 6.6 per cent (10.2% previously). Again, since "talking with others" was chosen by the smallest numbers from both surveys, it is another indication that the soap opera can be a topic of conversation for the students.

Collapsing questions five and six so that one provides a consistency check on the other, it seems that the complicated plot was most attractive (32.2% checked this) and the slowness of the plot (58.6%) was least attractive. The overdone nature of the presentations was most attractive to 26.0 per cent of the respondents, 18.3 per cent chose predictability, 21.5 per cent had some other reason and only 1.8 per cent found the slowness "most attractive." As far as disliking was concerned, the overdone nature of the plot was most disliked by 17 per cent, the obviousness by 15.4 per cent, and the complicated or other reason categories were registered by 4 per cent each.

When asked what they found most attractive about the characters in the soaps, unfortunately, considering methodology employed, 28.2 per cent answered that the reason was other than the choices listed. In the first survey this option was chosen by only 8.4 per cent of the students. Apart from that response, the pattern was similar to that of the first survey: 27.8 per cent chose "The characters are so dumb" (43.0% previously); 24.9 per cent (28.8% previously) chose the acting style; 13.2 per cent chose seeing yourself in the character (11.3% previously) and loving to hate the villains received 5.9 per cent checks (8.2% previously). Apparently the general lack of intelligence in the characters was appreciated by the students, they were not particularly

critical of the acting style, and a relative minority empathized with the protagonists. At least, that was their own perception of the phenomena, and only a psychological study could delve further.

By collapsing the two questions, "How do the soap operas best/least serve you?" a very consistent pattern emerged in which both the surveys give the same picture. A majority of the students claimed that they watched the soaps to be amused at the gullibility and naiveté of the characters and only a minority saw any cathartic value in the performances. Enough attention was given to the topic of conversation item in this forced choice situation to agree with the finding that it was seen as useful to them.

The figures on these questions were: For "best served," 56.9 per cent chose the amusement option, 16.5 per cent chose interesting plots, 11.0 per cent chose emotional release, 10.5 per cent chose topic of conversation and 6.2 per cent chose "Other"; for "least served," 49.1 per cent claimed it was the emotional release option, 18.3 per cent chose plot interest, 13.2 per cent chose amusement, 12.8 per cent chose topic of conversation and 6.6 per cent chose "Other."

The question on the general usefulness of viewing soap operas met with a majority response (67.6%) that such activity was neither useful nor useless. The numbers of responses tapered off towards the extreme choices: "Useful" gained 8.8 per cent, and "very useful" 1.8 per cent; "Sometimes useless" 12.1 per cent and "Always useless" 9.6 per cent. This pattern was similar to that from the first survey.

As far as the usefulness of the soap opera to the students' personal work or study, the majority of the soap opera watchers (52.5%) admitted that it was always useless. While 8.5 per cent hedged by choosing "sometimes

useless," 34.6 per cent claimed that the serials were neither useful nor useless. A small minority (2.9%) claimed the soaps were useful to their work and study, and a very small minority (1.8%) claimed them as very useful. This also repeated the pattern established from the previous survey.

When asked what they would like to see more of in the serials, over half (52.9%) wanted more realistic characters and plots. More complex plots were chosen by 19.5 per cent tieing in with the previous finding that complex plots were most liked and least disliked. While 16.9 per cent had another choice from those listed, 7.0 per cent wanted more good characters, and 3.7 per cent chose more evil characters. This pattern was a repeat of the first survey except that in the first one 10.6 per cent wanted more evil characters and only 5.5 per cent wanted more good characters. Whether this response was a frivolous one or a recognition that the portrayal of villainy is a prerequisite for this type of drama is beyond the scope of the study. Certainly, the thrust for more realistic theatre appears to be within the mainstream of commercial twentieth century theatre practice.

The character most likely to be the troublemaker is a woman according to 68.3 per cent (64.6% previously) of the students surveyed. The male was the troublemaker according to 3.0 per cent. 28.8 per cent (32.3% previously) held the opinion that both sexes were equally represented. This perception was not determined by the sex of the respondent. Of the males who responded 3.4 per cent claimed that men were the troublemakers, 69.0 per cent claimed women were the troublemakers and 27.6 per cent chose both equally. Similarly for the females who responded, 2.8 per cent checked the male as the troublemaker, 68.1 per cent checked the female and 21.9 per cent claimed "both equally."

The students' perceptions here go against the conventional wisdom.

Rudolph Arnheim noted in 1942 that in the daytime serial, "men appear considerably more often as troublemakers than women do."[6] While this aspect of the soaps' thematic continuity may have changed over the years, another distinguished critic, Leslie Fiedler, can be quoted as saying in 1976 that the soaps are anti-male: "First they show how men exploit women, and second, in a crisis the men are impotent."[7]

Infidelity was unlikely to be relegated exclusively to either sex in the soaps according to 45.4 per cent of those surveyed--24.2 per cent claimed that the men were more likely to be unfaithful, and 30.4 percent chose the women. This pattern again corresponded with that of the previous survey.

Those who did not watch soap operas answered the third instead of the second portion of the questionnaire. Of the five choices presented as reasons why they didn't watch the soaps fully 46.8 per cent chose the "other" category. (In the previous survey this was the choice of 29.5 per cent). The option with the largest response was: "There is no pleasure in watching other people's problems" which was chosen by 21.5 per cent (29.5% previously). "The plot is too contrived" option was chosen by 10.9 per cent, "the characters are unbelievable" option by 10.6 per cent, and "the pace is too slow" by 10.2 per cent. Thus this question couldn't identify any particular reason for not watching soaps, although the patterns of the answers in both surveys approximated one another.

The non-watchers could find considerable agreement, however, in why other people viewed the soaps. The reasons chosen were escapism (36.4%) and safe sensationalism (39.7%) where no involvement was required. Following the pattern of the previous survey, the other options scored low: "like to see others suffer" was chosen by 6.7 per cent and "enjoy hating the villains" by

2.5 per cent. Almost a fifth (19.4%) thought that there was another reason for all the soap opera watching.

A majority of the non-viewers (69.4%) thought that soap operas made no contribution to their viewers' welfare; 17.9 per cent claimed that the soaps were useful and 14.0 per cent claimed they were harmful. Small minorities claimed they were very useful (2.1%) and very harmful (4.9%). Again, this pattern was the same in the first survey.

Summary

Soap operas, for so long seen only as appealing to the house-bound female and the elderly, obviously exert an attraction for the young college students who have the time to spend during the day to watch them.

Half the student population on campus claims to watch soap operas, fully 40 per cent of the women and 10 per cent of the men.

This cohort appears not to think that watching soap operas is beneath their dignity as appeared to be the case with college students ten or fifteen years ago, but rather accepts them at face value. Quite a large proportion of the students claim that the plots are interesting and that the soaps provide topics of conversation.

Despite the analysis of the critics, the students do not see the long-suffering female in the soaps put upon by the weak, selfish and vicious male. Rather, the troublemakers are most often identified as female.

While what the students claim to watch and what they actually watch may be at variance, their claims and perceptions provide valid insights into this remarkable phenomenon on campuses across the nation. This survey, linked with participant observer research and a thorough content analysis of the various

soaps, may serve to provide greater insight into one of the more intriguing aspects of current mass audience behavior.

References

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[3]Manuela Soares, The Soap Opera Book (New York: Harmony Books, 1978).

[4]Time, "Sex and Suffering in the Afternoon" (January 12, 1976), p. 46.

[5]Barton, p. 9.

[6]Rudolph Arnheim, "The World of the Daytime Serial," in Mass Communications, ed. Wilbur Schramm (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 404.

[8]Time, p. 53.